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SOUND BUYING METHODS FOR CONSUMERS

Ruth O'Brien
Chief, Division of Textiles and Clothing,
Bureau of Home Economics, U. S. Department of Agriculture

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Personally I do not care for talk of wars and battles but since our topic this morning is the Battle of the Brands, I propose to discuss the munitions that are and might be used in this battle.

Every war sees the introduction of new kinds of ammunition. The Battle of the Brands is no exception. One new shell which is whizzing around our heads a great deal nowadays is called "consumer education." We hear it talked about at distribution and advertising conferences. It is fired at teachers and consumers in great barrages of pamphlets and advertising copy.

With all the effort and money we are expending on this and similar promotional activities, why are we not having better success? I believe that most of us will agree that somehow our present selling methods are failing. There is purchasing power enough in the country right now to put many more hundreds of thousands to work. But instead of this consumer education on the part of advertising and distributing organizations building up an appreciation of merchandise, we are all aware of a steadily growing resistance on the part of consumers. They are "digging in" so that the barrage is ineffective. Moreover, they are putting up a counter offensive of their own. Never before have we had so many consumer organizations, so much written and spoken about consumers' problems.

And let us not delude ourselves into believing that this is a spasmodic thing - a flash in the pan that will be gone tomorrow. I recall the beginning of our present consumer movement all of 20 years ago. It has

steadily grown. Unfortunately it has been fed very heavily during the past decade by the misrepresentations and exaggerations indulged in by a few short-sighted merchandising interests. Another source of nourishment was the degradation of merchandise quality, which accompanied the depression.

Contrary to the belief of some distributors, these consumer groups are not radical organizations of persons with impossible theories. They are composed of plain, everyday folks who have begun to realize that the way they spend their money is of vital importance to them. We come in contact with many of them through the work of the Bureau of Home Economics. A large number are neighborhood groups of men and women who have grown tired of being met with only meaningless, romantic words when they have made every effort to learn the difference between the dozens of makes of vacuum cleaners, the 4500 brands of canned corn, the 85 or more different trade-named electrical washing machines. A great many college-trained homemakers are leading consumers' study groups on advertising, informative labels, and price and quality variations in highly branded goods. Literally thousands of farm women are discussing consumer buying in the organizations which formerly devoted themselves exclusively to cooking and sewing lessons. Other thousands of women are considering consumer problems as part of the study programs of professional organizations of such high standing as the American Association of University Women, the American Home Economics Association, the League of Women Voters, and the National Congress of Parents and Teachers.

When we consider these activities in an unbiased fashion, we see that these people are merely asking for the same kind of information the business man insists upon having before he buys his materials. They want the same facts large corporations and public agencies demand about their purchases. The resentment which sometimes flares in such groups is merely resentment of the fog which baffles and bewilders anyone trying to compare the myriad of

brands on the present market. I have noticed that even manufacturers can work up considerable resentment when it comes their turn to be consumers and they are attempting to buy the other fellow's goods. Try it out some time by introducing the subject of buying shirts in a crowd of any but textile men.

I believe consumer complaints are justified that merchants are now making it impossible for consumers to buy otherwise than entirely by guess. For example, suppose after months or even years of making contributions to the broken tea pot on the pantry shelf, I finally accumulate enough hard-earned and hard-saved dollars to buy a refrigerator. They represent a lot of doing-without but my family and I have decided that we need a refrigerator worse than anything else and we have been willing to make the necessary sacrifices. Do you suppose I want to hand that money over to the first clerk I meet merely on the basis of a lot of high-pressure sales talk chiefly about the lovely finish on the box and a few gadgets? I do not. It is probably the only time that we will ever buy a refrigerator. I cannot afford to experiment by buying and discarding one make after another.

I want to buy one right now that will maintain the proper temperature inside the box during the hottest weather; that will cost me the least to operate; that, taking into account what I have to spend, will be the most durable and will give me as much storage space as possible. I want to know all the other practical things a homemaker with an average income wants to know about the refrigerator which must do her for years to come. In other words, I merely want facts. And I want them in writing.

What can I do? I can only read the advertisements diligently and go from store to store interviewing clerks. And what do I learn? Really nothing factual. The advertisements tell me the XYZ refrigerator is the most colossal, superb, magnificent, supreme, stream-lined refrigerator ever built. I see the beautifully colored pictures of people in handsome evening

clothes - all apparently spending a jolly evening grouped around a pretty box in an ultramodern kitchen. The clerks, I find, are as utterly devoid of real facts concerning their wares as I am.

If I am shopping this month, I will finally come across, in all the maze of adjectives and gadgets and jolly parties, one manufacturers' product carrying a label which tells me something. That label, which has only appeared for the first time during the past few weeks, states the usable storage space in the refrigerator, its shelf area, the total cubical contents of the interior of the refrigerator, the ice meltage rate, the mean cooling effect, and the temperature differential. And this is followed by a short, concise understandable statement of the meaning of these terms, all written in plain English. I rejoice that at last one manufacturer is using ink and labels to tell me something far more useful than that Mrs. Percy Millionaire simply adores the XYZ refrigerator or that it is approved by the Rubber Stamp Laboratory. That one manufacturer has sensed the real meaning of consumer education and I believe strongly in that kind. In fact, I believe it is the most effective ammunition any brand has.

After all, education is the training of the individual to search for facts and act upon those facts. So if consumer education is to be really effective as ammunition, it must consist of carefully directed shrapnel made of good hard facts. And it must be supported by infantry fire in the form of still more facts aimed at individuals. Of course, gas may sometimes do the job if the weather and the terrain are just right. But it is well to remember that a little clear, fresh air will quickly dissipate a gas attack. Consumers are tired of generalities and superlatives. The mere repetition of a brand name has lost its influence. There are too many of them screaming from the radio and the magazine pages, with nothing definite to back up the claims of superiority.

"Approval services," which do not make public the standards upon which they base their judgments, have multiplied like rabbits until they, too, have ceased to be effective ammunition. Vague statements implying even more vague guarantees have become merely so much ornate lettering.

We are now in the midst of a movement to increase home building and home repair. How much of the reluctance to invest previous savings in such activities is due to the utter lack of any definite information on the quality of building materials for the guidance of the home owner? Did you ever try to get definite facts on the innumerable qualities of all the various items which go into a house? I have. Such facts simply don't exist. You are told to trust all that to your architect and to your contractor. Such faith may be justified if one has the means to employ the services of a large firm of architects with experts on all the various materials. But it doesn't work with the facilities available to the modest home owner. I have asked my friends who are living in the houses they built. If home owners could get information which would enable them to choose the best qualities of building materials for the money they have to expend, they would go ahead with far greater confidence. Again and again the extension service of the Department of Agriculture has met this reaction this year in farm communities.

Consumers are not stupid. That idea is a part of an ostrich complex of those who will not lift their heads from the comforting sands and see what is happening. From the days of the Pilgrim fathers we have maintained schools in this country. The enrollment has grown until, according to the Federal Office of Education, more than one in every four persons (children and adults) are enrolled right now in a school of some kind. We are spending 4 billion dollars annually on public schools in the United States. Does this mean that we are a nation of ignorant peasants and gullible people? The very unpleasant but absolute truth is that as it has turned out in many an industry, the

gullible person has not been the consumer.

An item in a trade (not a consumers') magazine recently gave an excellent illustration of this. I quote:

"It is a bland assertion on the part of many textile manufacturers that 'women buy what they are shown' and do not bother about construction or quality in dress fabrics. Too strong a belief in this statement has led to much confusion and great grief to weavers who in late years produced silks that were excessively weighted. Truthful tickets were not compulsory and fabrics were sold as 'pure silk' 'pure dye' that in reality had foreign substances introduced in the yarn or in the finished fabric to increase weight and add to draping qualities. Now there is a movement under way [on the part of the industry] to 'educate' the consumer..... It seems nothing short of comical that the term 'educate the consumer' should be applied to women by those interested in silk as it has been the severely applied action of women in trading away from silk that has brought the silk industry to its present status. Women did not wait to have piece goods manufacturers or the trade interested in the sale of raw silk, educate them as to what was going on. Their own sad experiences proved the best possible teachers. Without making any outcry but simply by means of shifting their purchases to other classes of textiles, the women of this country in the span between 1923 and the present date 'signed off' on silk...."

The only statement here with which I disagree is that the women did this "without making any outcry." Throughout these years, it happened that I sat in many a conference of silk manufacturers at which representatives of consumers' organizations urged informative labeling and pointed out what was happening. But all to no avail.

I have seen a well-meaning promotor stand up before a group of home economics teachers with the object of educating them about his client's product. I have heard him give out a volume of naive sales talk that every woman in that audience knew was inaccurate. I have seen him distribute some extremely expensive leaflets to which he referred as educational material for the teachers to use in their classes. His literature and his talk contained no information whatsoever. And then I heard what the teachers said after the well-meaning, highly-paid gentleman had gone his way. And I saw the bulk of his leaflets still lying around the room when the teachers left. That kind of ammunition is a "dud."

On the other hand, I was in a community only this past week where an intelligent representative of the table glassware trade had given a straightforward, sensible, factual talk on the various qualities of glassware and how to distinguish them. He left behind him copies, not of highly colored exaggerated sales talk, but a plain mimeographed concise outline of what he had said. He left something else behind him, too. It was an appreciation of good glassware which is spreading over that community. The groups he addressed are grateful for the definite help in buying which a truly informed man gave his hearers. They were plain average American consumers but he took them for what they also were - intelligent adults and he showed them the courtesy of talking to them as such.

How can facts be given to consumers? On some types of goods the easiest way is undoubtedly by some kind of a grading system - a system which makes it possible for the consumer to see, by a glance at the label, the grade of the article in a certain grading sequence. It does not help me to have Grade A stamped on an article if there is a double A, a triple A, and possibly a certified grade above this A, and nothing on the label indicates that fact. If words designating grades seem more satisfactory than a lettering or numbering system, lets have words. But lets get together and agree upon the same series of words for grading all merchandise. The chaos now existing in grading nomenclature on the wholesale market should be warning enough not to add to the confusion. If we need any proof of this, a glance at the recent report of the Consumers' Advisory Board entitled "A survey of the terms used in designating qualities of goods" will dispell any doubt.

By a "word" system, I do not mean the descriptive word labels the canning industry is talking about right now. I mean the use of a word like Fancy Grade instead of Grade A, Choice Grade instead of Grade B and Standard instead of C.

On some commodities, it is not a matter of grades in which one is definitely above another. It is rather a matter of different categories of equal rank, each with its own qualities which make it the most desirable for some particular consumer use. In such cases, words designating grades might be very satisfactory.

There are perhaps some types of merchandise for which any kind of a quality grade or category classification is impossible. However, it is well to go very slowly before we say that anything is impossible. I remember once sitting in a meeting listening to an impassioned oration on how utterly impossible it was to do something the orator was very anxious should not be done. What interested me most was that over and above his positive assertions, I could hear at that very moment the drone of airplanes which were celebrating the fact that one man had not had the word "impossible" in his vocabulary. By a strange coincidence, those planes were performing right then as part of the District of Columbia's jubilation over Lindbergh's successful flight to Paris.

Many have contended for years that while some kinds of consumers' goods might be graded as to quality, it would be totally impossible to put a grade designation on textile materials. But today, this impossible thing is being done by one department store in the case of household blankets. Each blanket sold there carries a label designating both the warmth and the durability of the blanket in terms of an A, B, C rating scale. So, for instance, a blanket may be marked A for warmth and C for durability, both based on ratings given it by the store's testing laboratory. The customer then knows why the difference in price between the various blankets and can choose the combination of qualities which best suits her needs and her pocketbook.

Some merchants feel that labeling a product B or C puts a stigma upon it which drives away customers. I do not agree with this point of view. The great mass of consumers are hunting for the article which best suits the par-

ticular use to which it is to be put. It is a question not of the most luxurious or finest thing that can be made but of the thing which has the qualities the consumer wants at a price he can pay. I am convinced that the great mass of consumers today have a business-like, almost "hard-boiled" attitude towards their money expenditures and glory in buying articles labeled C or B if they know what they are getting and find it does the job for them at a lesser cost. The consumer does resent paying an A price for a C product or when an A is desired, finding that an unlabeled C grade has been foisted on her.

And this does not mean that the brand name has lost significance to her. That is the signature of the manufacturer and will continue to identify his product to her. There are, and always will be differences in color, in finish, and in detail of different products which fall within the same grade. These would be stressed on labels and in advertising in addition to the grade designations. The consumer chooses those which appeal to her perhaps on this emotional basis we hear so much about but, at the same time, guideposts in regard to certain fundamental qualities have been set for her.

It is no wonder the blanket department head in the store mentioned above reports that there has been more evidence of consumer good will and fewer blankets returned since the system was put into effect. A consumer appreciates definite statements rather than to have every blanket on the counter labeled with some fantastical statement like "Warm as a polar bear," or "Wears like iron." Demonstrative affection has its place in this world but a woman trying desperately to find out some facts concerning the quality of blankets is not impressed by a label which talks about "soft, cuddling, caressing blankets," instead of giving her useful facts.

Grade labeling will affect the brand which has been selling a C grade for an A price. It should. It will affect unethical advertising. It should. But it will help rather than hinder the reputable manufacturer and distributor

who now are obliged to meet such kinds of competition. We are all familiar with instances in which a very poor quality of a commodity has completely forced a higher quality off the market because there was no grading or definite means of informing the public of the differences between the products. Only superlatives were available to describe both.

Don't misunderstand me. It is not to the consumer's interest that all low quality be taken off the market. But it is to her interest that she know what she is buying, that she pays a price which corresponds to this quality, and that she have a basis for comparing different qualities.

Grade labeling is increasing. I am informed that early in December a group of stores will begin to give its customers the grade information on canned foods which has long been used in all other steps of merchandising such goods but has been vigorously denied consumers. And we should not forget that the Code of the Canned Dog Food Industry bounded out in front with head held high and tail a-waving. That code is one of the few providing for grade labeling on a consumer's product. Good old fido!

This year one large cooperative turkey marketing association has ordered a hundred thousand tags for the grade labeling of turkeys to be put on the retail market by that organization this holiday season. Seattle has recently passed a municipal ordinance requiring that all fresh beef, lamb, mutton, and veal sold in the city be graded and stamped according to quality standards developed by the Department of Agriculture.

But when the type of commodity does make grading impossible, specifications relating to those qualities on which the consumer needs information may be the answer. In other cases, definite statements regarding important qualities may be the most helpful. An example is the type used on the refrigerator labels I mentioned. Whatever the form, the information must be definitely attached to the article in question. General essays on construc-

tion and quality such as we find in consumers' buying guides of various kinds merely tell the consumer what she should be able to find out about a product. But the fact remains that it is impossible for her to get this information either from manufacturers or retailers at the present time.

Of course it will be a difficult task to work out effective grading systems, or other quality specifications and other kinds of definite consumer guides for all consumers' goods. It will take time. But the task is not impossible and undoubtedly it is the next progressive step in retail merchandising.

